

Preventing Natural Resource Impairment

“Humans have achieved mastery over most of the earth’s surface. With this mastery has come an acute awareness ... that the land will not sustain humans unless humans sustain the land.”

—William L. Halvorson
National Parks and Protected Areas: Their Role in Environmental Protection

The National Park Service is responsible for ensuring that the resources of the National Park System are passed on “unimpaired” for the enjoyment of future generations. Park management decisions are predicated on the test that actions will not impair resources or the values associated with them. Nevertheless, the role of the National Park Service as caretaker of the nation’s extraordinary heritage is increasingly challenging given the wide variety of influences that affect park resources, many of which arise outside park boundaries and result from complex environmental, social, political, and economic factors. As the articles in this chapter illustrate, maintaining the health of park resources requires vigilance. It also involves the courage to lead a debate on what is necessary to preserve park resources. It takes skill to marshal scientific investigation to inform park managers and the public about a threat. And it demands patience to effect resolution. Finally, park preservation is impossible without diligence, expertise, strong partnerships, and public support. At stake is the National Park Service’s “contract with the future”—the perpetuation of a park system that is the collective expression of America’s superlative heritage.



Sustainer of life in the Chihuahuan Desert, the Rio Grande stopped flowing in May 2003 before the start of seasonal rains. This extremely rare event is heightening concerns for the ecological health of the river ecosystem in Big Bend National Park and the Rio Grande Wild and Scenic River, which has been in decline for decades.